

4.10 VISUAL RESOURCES

4.10.1 Setting

San Luis Obispo County is a popular destination for visitors, in part due to its scenic variety and rural character. The county contains a variety of scenery and vegetation. Stands of pines in the north coastal portion of the County give way to oak-dotted grasslands, chaparral, and sand dunes along the southern coast. Inland, livestock populates grass-covered rolling hills, oak savannah, and chaparral. The diverse geologic features which characterize the County include forms of volcanic rock (most notable are the Morros extending from San Luis Obispo to Morro Bay), alluvial material washed into fertile valleys and sand dunes.

The steep Santa Lucia mountain range is the major physical barrier dividing the County into coastal and inland portions. The dark tones of the chaparral and oak woodlands that cover the slopes of the Santa Lucia Mountains provide contrast to the grasslands of the range's lower slopes. This area is sparsely developed, as the steep slopes, dense vegetative cover, and lack of extensive transportation, infrastructure, and public service networks have historically limited urbanization and agricultural activity.

a. View Corridors and Scenic Drives. View corridors are human-made or natural features that afford line-of-sight views of distant visual resources such as peaks, ridgelines, and valleys. These include valleys and major roadways.

Scenic drives are roadways that afford views of important features to travelers. Highway 1 is the only state-designated scenic highway in the County. Highway 1 (Pacific Coast Highway / Cabrillo Highway) is one of the most important transportation and travel routes within the County. Highway 1 is designated within the California Coastal Plan as a visually scenic corridor to be protected and is designated a State Scenic Highway. Highway 1 offers many views of both ocean and hillsides to the traveler. Eligible state facilities include Highways 33 and 166, located in the southern portion of the County; and Highways 41 and 46, located in the northern portion of the County.

The County identifies in its various planning documents a number of additional view corridors and roadways and corridors that have scenic value. These areas (Figure 4.10-1) are specifically designated in the following planning areas:

- Adelaida
- El Pomar – Estrella
- Estero
- Huasna – Lopez
- Nacimiento
- North Coast
- Salinas River
- San Luis Obispo
- South County (Inland)



b. Light, Glare, and Sky Glow. During the day, sunlight reflecting from structures is a primary source of glare, while nighttime light and glare can be divided into both stationary and mobile sources. Stationary sources of nighttime light include structure illumination, interior lighting, sports field illumination, decorative landscape lighting, and streetlights. The principal mobile source of nighttime lighting and glare is vehicle headlamp illumination. During nighttime hours, this ambient light environment can be accentuated during periods of low clouds or fog, which can increase the amount of light and reflective glare.

Sky glow is the effect created by light reflecting into the night sky. Sky glow is of particular concern in areas surrounding observatories, where darker night sky conditions are necessary, but is also of concern in more rural or natural areas where a darker night sky is either the norm or is important to wildlife.

c. Built Environment and Community Separators. Existing urban areas often have an established character, based on existing development patterns, infrastructure (e.g. street grid), architectural design, and landscaping. In many communities, design guidelines have been adopted to ensure that future development fits appropriately in context with the surrounding built environment. The built environment in the rural areas is less cohesive, with scattered development occurring amongst natural features and agricultural uses. In these areas, structural development often contrasts against surrounding landscapes and natural features.

A characteristic that distinguishes San Luis Obispo County from metropolitan areas is the continued existence of rural-appearing land, called *community separators*, between separate, identifiable communities. These separators are a crucial part of maintaining separate and distinct identities for each community, and for defining the boundary between urban and rural uses.

d. Regulatory Framework.

California Coastal Act of 1976. The California Coastal Act of 1976 was intended to protect a range of coastal resources. Section 30251 of the act specifically addresses the preservation of scenic and visual qualities:

The scenic and visual qualities of coastal areas shall be considered and protected as a resource of public importance. Permitted development shall be sited and designed to protect views to and along the ocean and scenic coastal areas, and, where feasible, to restore and enhance visual quality in visually degraded areas.

The Coastal Act emphasizes the protection of ocean and coastal views from public areas such as highways, roads, beaches, parks, coastal trails and access ways, vista points, and other public vistas. The Act designates Highway 1 as the most important coastal scenic highway in the state, requiring that the highway remain a two lane road in rural areas. Turn-outs, coastal access, and other improvements designed to increase travelers' opportunities to enjoy the shoreline are also recommended for inclusion in the Local Coastal Program. The special status of Highway 1 within the state's plan and its designation as a scenic highway mandates that the County protect the views from Highway 1.



Coastal Plan Policies Document. The Coastal Plan Policies Document is part of the Land Use Element / Local Coastal Program (LUE/LCP). It contains policies that have been incorporated into the LUE/LCP as standards or policies. The Coastal Plan Policies Document sets forth a number of policies related to the preservation of visual and scenic resources, including the following:

- Protection of visual and scenic resources;
- Site selection for new development;
- New development in rural areas;
- Landform alterations;
- Special communities and small scale neighborhoods;
- Preservation of trees and native vegetation;
- Utility lines within view corridors;
- Signs;
- Development on beaches and sand dunes; and
- Development on coastal bluffs.

Coastal Zone Framework for Planning. The Framework for Planning document of the Land Use Element / Local Coastal Program contains baseline information and policies that are further refined and applied through the area plans. The Framework for Planning also contains information pertaining to visual and scenic resources, including circulation design consideration, allowable uses within land use categories, and the combining designations program description and definitions.

Agriculture and Open Space Element. The Agriculture and Open Space Element of the General Plan includes policies regarding establishment of scenic corridors and development within these corridors. In addition, numerous policies aimed at protecting natural resources may have the indirect effect of protecting visual resources, as the two are closely related.

The Agriculture and Open Space Element recommends studying a number of roads and highways to determine if and where scenic corridors should be designated (OSP 24). Open Space Policy (OSP) 25 contains policies to protect scenic vistas within scenic corridors through location of structures, grading, screening and design, and placement of signs in discretionary development and land divisions.

The open space portion of the Agriculture and Open Space Element is currently being considered for consolidation into a new Conservation and Open Space Element (COSE). The COSE is in its draft stages at this time.

Esthetic Element. The Esthetic Element of the General Plan, which was adopted by the County in 1974, includes several brief policies addressing “visual pollution.” These policies relate to the following:

- Billboard removal;
- Large signs and visual clutter;
- Undergrounding of utilities;
- Disposal of abandoned vehicles;



- Enforcement of litter laws;
- Renovation of historic buildings;
- Location of industrial areas;
- Landscaping new developments; and
- Considering aesthetics in project design.

The Esthetic Element itself is a component of the Environmental Plan, which itself serves as the County's Conservation Element. An update to the Conservation Element is currently proposed. The new consolidated Conservation and Open Space Element is proposed to include a section on visual resources. The April 2009 Public Hearing Draft presently proposes the following policies, relating to aesthetics:

- Adopt scenic protection standards.
- Develop in a manner compatible with historical and visual resources.
- Site development and landscaping sensitively.
- Revise countywide design guidelines.
- Encourage community involvement.
- Use conservation tools.
- Maintain clear community edges.
- Avoid annexation in community separators.
- Designate scenic corridors.
- Balance protection of resources.
- Avoid interference with agricultural uses.
- Collaborate with property owners.
- Develop policies and standards for the design of scenic roadways.
- Retain existing scenic areas.
- Create new scenic areas.
- Consider aesthetics in General Plan Conformity Reports for sale of public land.
- Consider design for projects in the urban area.
- Protect clarity and visibility of the night sky.
- Continue to prohibit billboards.
- Encourage creation of a system of roadside informational signs.
- Place utilities underground for new development projects.
- Encourage development of a comprehensive plan for undergrounding existing utilities.
- Locate, design, and screen communication facilities to minimize appearance.
- Require co-location of communication facilities.

These policies have not yet been adopted and are subject to change.

Inland Framework for Planning. The Inland Framework for Planning, a component of the General Plan's Land Use Element, was recently modified to incorporate strategic growth policies. These policies encourage location of new development in existing urban areas, and reduction of growth in the rural areas.



Land Use Ordinance. The Land Use Ordinance (LUO) applies only to the portions of the County that are located outside of the Coastal Zone. Planning Area Standards from the inland area plans have been incorporated into Article 9 of the LUO. Highway corridor design standards and standards for specifically designated Sensitive Resource Areas (SRAs) have been incorporated into these Planning Area Standards.

Area Plans. Within the Coastal Zone, Planning Area Standards remain located in the four individual Area Plans. Standards pertaining scenic resources exist in the Estero and North Coast Area Plans.

4.10.2 Impact Analysis

a. Methodology and Significance Thresholds. Appendix G of the State CEQA Guidelines states that a project would result in a significant impact if it would:

- *Have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista.*
- *Substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway.*
- *Substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings*
- *Create a new source of substantial light or glare which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area.*

Additionally, the County of San Luis Obispo has established local thresholds pertaining to aesthetics and visual resources. Impacts would be significant if development resulting from the project would do any of the following:

- *Create an aesthetically incompatible site open to public view;*
- *Introduce a use within a scenic view open to public view;*
- *Change the visual character of an area;*
- *Create glare or night lighting, which may affect surrounding areas; or*
- *Impact unique geological or physical features.*

b. Project Impacts and Mitigation Measures.

Impact VR-1 The proposed Grading and Stormwater Management Ordinances would modify the County's current development standards. This could lead to a potential change in development patterns and a change in physical impacts to scenic resources. Impacts would be Class II, *significant but mitigable.*

The proposed Grading and Stormwater Management Ordinances are intended to strengthen protections relating to illicit discharges from construction sites and post-construction discharges for specific uses. These new provisions will require additional facilities to handle and treat stormwater, for certain types of projects. Drainage facilities, such as basins and concrete drains, could be located in highly scenic areas. Additionally, accommodation of such facilities could necessitate removal of vegetation or additional alteration of terrain.



The proposed revisions would also introduce agricultural exemptions and the Alternative Review Process to the Coastal Zone. Presently, most agricultural grading in the Coastal Zone requires grading permit approval. By adding exemptions and the ability for certain projects to be reviewed by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) or one of the County's two Resource Conservation Districts (RCDs), this could potentially facilitate grading for agricultural uses in scenic areas. The Coastal Plan Policies document recognizes that agricultural uses contribute towards the scenic pastoral nature of the rural lands in the Coastal Zone. The proposed addition of agricultural exemptions and the option for alternative review would not affect the implementation of Coastal Plan Policies that have been established for the protection of visual resources. Additionally, the revisions will not change the thresholds for which a Coastal Development Permit would be required or the standards for development in an Environmentally Sensitive Habitat Area (ESHA).

The proposed revisions would modify the types of projects that can go through the Alternative Review Process. This process is overseen by either a federal agency (NRCS) or local agency (RCDs). Projects which are permitted through this process are also subject to an environmental determination under the same or similar parameters.

Overall, the proposed revisions will strengthen the review criteria for most development projects. Projects which are subject to the Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System (MS4) requirements will need to consider stormwater management upfront, during the initial land use permit or land division process. This will enable consideration of the visual effect of stormwater and drainage facilities in the environmental review, and will allow the review authority to consider and address any potential visual resource issues upfront.

Mitigation Measures. The following mitigation measures are required:

VR-1(a) Project-Specific Consideration of Scenic Resources. Grading projects which are subject to environmental review, shall be considered for consistency with County thresholds of significance for aesthetics and visual resources. Review of grading proposals shall consider the following:

- Removal of trees or visually dominant vegetation.
- Location, height, massing, colors, and materials of proposed structures and retaining walls.
- Location of driveways or access roads and their associated cut and fill slopes.
- Placement of water tanks, propane tanks, and other infrastructure.
- Blending of graded slopes with surrounding natural contours.
- Blending of proposed landscaping with surrounding natural vegetation.
- "Silhouetting" resulting from the placement of structures on ridge-tops.

Appropriate mitigation measures shall be discussed in the Initial Study for projects which have the potential to impact scenic resources.



VR-1(b) Criteria for Grading Permit Approval. In compliance with the proposed criteria for approval, the County shall issue a grading permit only if it can be demonstrated that the project will not create substantial long-term adverse visual effects. If this criterion cannot be satisfied, a grading permit shall only be issued after a project Environmental Impact Report has been prepared and the review authority has adopted overriding findings. Additionally, the County shall only issue grading permits where the Director first finds:

- The proposed grading design is consistent with the characteristics and constraints of the site;
- The extent and nature of proposed grading is appropriate for the use proposed, and will not create site disturbance to an extent greater than that required to establish the use; and
- Proposed grading is consistent with the General Plan and any applicable specific plan. This includes consistency with highway corridor design policies established in several of the area plans.

VR-1(c) Site Work in Scenic Areas. Grading, vegetation removal, and other landform alterations shall be minimized on sites located within areas determined by the Director to be a public view corridor from collector or arterial roads.

VR-1(d) Stormwater and Drainage Devices. Should stormwater management and drainage devices will be located where they will be highly visible from a public road or within a public viewshed, they shall be screened where practical. Additionally, such devices shall comply with the following provisions:

- Drainage devices shall be consistent with the character of the area and the existing topography.
- Exposed concrete overside drains shall be prohibited within public viewsheds. Drainage shall be conveyed by underground pipe, rock lined ditches, or other approved material to blend in with the natural topography in character, color, and design. An exception to this prohibition may be granted where a visual analysis indicates that the prohibition is unnecessary. In this circumstance, concrete drains shall be the minimum size necessary to handle drainage and ensure appropriate maintenance.
- Transitions from natural drainage courses to developed areas shall be accomplished with comparable landscaping and grading to blend with existing topography.
- Detention, retention, or recharge basins shall be designed as a visual and/or recreational amenity within a project, wherever practical.



- VR-1(e) Contouring.** The border of all cut and fill slopes shall be rounded off to a minimum radius of five feet to blend in with the natural terrain.

Significance after Mitigation. With the implementation of the above measures, impacts would be less than significant.

- Impact VR-2** The proposed Grading and Stormwater Management Ordinances would modify the County's current development standards. This could lead to a potential change in development patterns and a change in physical impacts relating to glare. Impacts would be Class II, *significant but mitigable*.

The proposed revisions will introduce new post-construction stormwater management requirements for specified uses. These uses are identified in Attachment 4 of the State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB) General Construction Permit for Municipal Separate Storm Sewer Systems (MS4s). In some cases, projects are required to cover certain areas, such as trash enclosures, fueling areas, and repair/maintenance bays. Covering these areas would allow stormwater to be diverted away from potential contaminants. Certain reflective types of roofing, however, could contribute towards glare. All projects covered under the MS4 standards are discretionary, and are therefore subject to a project-specific environmental determination.

Mitigation Measures: The following mitigation measure is required:

- VR-2(a) Project-Specific Consideration of Glare.** Projects which are subject to environmental review, shall be considered for consistency with County thresholds of significance for aesthetics and visual resources. Review of proposals shall consider potential glare as a result of roofing color and material.

Significance after Mitigation. With the implementation of the above measure, impacts would be less than significant.

- Impact VR-3** The proposed Grading and Stormwater Management Ordinances would modify the County's current development standards. This could lead to a potential change in development patterns and a change in physical impacts relating to night lighting. Assuming development occurs in compliance with existing ordinance provisions, this is a Class III, *less than significant, impact*.

The proposed revisions could potentially affect development patterns. As such, location and placement of exterior lighting could be affected. The Land Use Ordinance (Section 22.10.060) and Coastal Zone Ordinance (Section 23.04.320) currently have standards in place to address exterior lighting. These standards require that lighting sources and reflective surfaces be shielded from off-site view. These existing standards would be able to effectively address any changes to night lighting that would result from the proposed Grading and Stormwater Management Ordinances.



Mitigation Measures: With the incorporation of existing ordinance standards and policies, no further mitigation measures are required.

Significance after Mitigation. Impacts would be less than significant.

Impact VR-4 The proposed Grading and Stormwater Management Ordinances would modify the County's current development standards. These modifications would reduce the amount of grading that could occur on steep slopes. This would reduce the visual effect of large cut and fill slopes to support roads, building pads, and other development. This is a Class IV, beneficial, impact.

Currently, the Coastal Zone limits development to slopes of less than 20 percent. Certain development can be permitted on slopes between 20 and 30 percent through the Minor Use Permit process. Development on slopes greater than 30 percent would require approval through the Variance process. The criteria for Variance approval, as designated by the state, are comparatively strict.

There are currently no slope limitations imposed by the Grading Ordinance in the inland portion of the County. The Draft Conservation and Open Space Element, which is currently under review, includes a policy to prohibit grading on slopes greater than 30 percent, countywide:

Implementation Strategy SL 1.3.2: Amend the Land Use Ordinance to require a variance to grade on slopes over 30 percent.

The proposed Grading and Stormwater Management Ordinances propose to implement this policy if it is adopted under the Conservation and Open Space Element. While this policy was intended as a means to reduce erosion and sedimentation, it would have a secondary benefit of reducing large cut and fill slopes which are necessary to accommodate development on steep terrain. On sites with no alternative building location, an applicant would still be able to apply for a Variance. On sites with alternative building locations, the project would not likely meet the necessary findings for Variance approval. As such, this policy, if enacted by the proposed ordinance, would have the effect of preventing development from occurring on steep slopes, when doing so is not a necessity to accommodate the proposed use.

Mitigation Measures. As discussed above, no mitigation would be necessary, as this would be a beneficial impact.

Significance after Mitigation. Impacts would be less than significant.

c. Cumulative Impacts. Development under the proposed Grading and Stormwater Management Ordinances could result in incremental impacts to scenic resources. However, with the incorporation of the mitigation measures provided above, individual project's contribution towards a cumulative impact would be reduced on a project-by-project basis. Each individual project, under these ordinances, would be subject to project-specific environmental review. Appropriate mitigation measures will be incorporated into the individual projects as part of the environmental review process.

